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## THE AMERICAN DRAMA: A SURVEY

A while ago in speaking of the prospects of the American drama in the light of conditions produced by the Great War, I pointed out America's great and unprecedented opportunity for leadership in dramatic creation. Since that time the United States has been irresistibly drawn into the vortex of the world struggle. Prospects which seemed to open before the American dramatist then are no longer so certain or so available. While America has scarcely begun to feel the pinch of war, so far as the theatre and the drama are concerned, it is scarcely to be doubted that, if the war is of long duration, the reactions upon the American drama and the business of play production will be immense and sharply cumulative. While New York can boast a season of extraordinary variety, richness, and distinction, the road companies of former and present New York successes are encountering conditions increasing in difficulty. With all her boasted prosperity, America is taking with due seriousness the obligations of stupendous proportions imposed upon the country, the individual no less than the business institution, by the financial needs created by modern warfare. If "business as usual" is a slogan accepted with fair unanimity to aid in maintaining the normality of trade conditions, it is probably beginning to be acknowledged that "pleasure as usual" is a slogan which is far from meeting with general acceptance. "Smileage" campaigns for soldiers' amusement almost implies self-denial in amusement for the purchaser of the smileage book. And fuel shortage in the past winter has resulted in the closing of "movie" houses in all parts of the country. Assuming another year of warfare, a marked drop in the dramatic and theatrical barometer may naturally be anticipated in this country.

Thus far the dramatists of this country have furnished few signs of genuine response to the tremendous impressions and profound meanings driven home by the terrible and terribly continuing war. As the world is still in flux, and the clash of contending forms of governmental control and racial idealism resound in deafened ears, there is little reason to hope so soon

for great drama, adequately interpreting the significance of the struggle. A generation, several, may come and go—a century may elapse—before any definite comprehension of the issues and the eventualities is obtained. If the notable plays are not forthcoming, it is gratifying to observe the accumulating evidences on all hands of the persistent and irrepressible interest in the questions of the drama as a part of the literary history of America, of community drama, of the little theatre movement, of the open-air theatre, of the art as well as the business of play production, of the contributions of technic of the modern playwright, and of the larger lines of dramatic and theatrical history, whether associated with the name of William Shakespeare or of Augustin Daly.

While it is not my business here to deal with plays, as published, but with dramatic criticism and works on questions of the theatre, I wish to call attention with strong commendation to the movement now gaining impetus, which bids fair to bring to public attention as subjects for popular study American drama throughout the entire course of our history. As companion volume to *Representative English Plays* comes *Representative American Plays*,<sup>1</sup> edited by Professor Arthur Hobson Quinn of the University of Pennsylvania. In this volume are included plays ranging in time from 1765 to 1911, from *The Prince of Parthia* of Thomas Godfrey to *He and She* of Rachel Crothers. Each play is prefaced by a sketch of the dramatist, and many of these sketches contain much new and valuable information not hitherto known or accessible. The plays are admirably selected, being illustrative of different types of drama as well as representative examples of American drama at different periods of development. The first play in this volume has been recently republished in a limited edition, for the first time published separately since its original publication in 1765, *The Prince of Parthia*, the first tragedy by an American, and the first professionally produced in this country.<sup>2</sup> The studies in the early American drama upon the American stage, stimu-

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<sup>1</sup>The Century Company, New York. 1916.

<sup>2</sup>Little, Brown & Company, Boston. 1916.

lated by the departments of American and German literature in especial, at the University of Pennsylvania, find recent exemplification in two interesting monographs, which appeared almost simultaneously. Both were presented as theses in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of doctor of philosophy; both show the results of careful study and laborious research. *The Life and Writings of Richard Penn Smith*,<sup>3</sup> by Bruce Welker McCullough, is a monograph of one hundred pages, written under the direction of Professor Quinn. Concerning this little-known playwright, whose drama *The Triumph at Plattsburg* (1830) was included by Professor Quinn among representative American Plays, the author says: "As a transition playwright, Smith ties the former period of imitation to the new creative school of dramatists that was just coming into existence in Philadelphia. Though much of his work harks back to the time when adaptation was the customary practice among our playwrights his best productions, notably *Caius Marius*, point forward to the first great creative movement in our drama." The author was fortunate in having access to the unpublished manuscripts of Smith's plays; and he has enhanced the value of his monograph by republishing as an appendix Smith's play *The Deformed* based upon the edition of 1830, the only edition hitherto published. The second monograph, the result of researches directed by the late Professor M. D. Learned, is *The German Drama on the St. Louis Stage*,<sup>4</sup> by Alfred Henry Nolle. Valuable studies have been made on various phases of the German drama at the German theatre in this country—notably by L. C. Baker, C. F. Brede, and E. H. Zeydel; and the present volume is to be classed as an important addition to our knowledge in the same field. The subject has been historically and statistically studied in five periods: The Beginnings, 1842-1859; The St. Louis Opernhaus, 1859-1861; the chaotic period, of varying fortunes, from 1861 to 1891; A Revival of Interest, 1891-1912; and finally, The Present Directorship, The Victoria

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<sup>3</sup>George Banta Publishing Company, Menasha, Wisconsin. 1917.

<sup>4</sup>*Americana Germanica*. Publications of the University of Pennsylvania, No. 32. 1917.

Theatre, 1911-1914. Important influences in American culture are theatres where are produced, whether in German or in English, such plays of recent origin as Hauptmann's *Der Biberpelz*, *Kollege Crampton*, *Die Weber*; Sudermann's *Die Ehre*, *Das Glück im Winkel*, *Die Heimat*, *Es lebe das Leben*, *Der gute Ruf*, *Johannesfeuer*, *Die Schmetterlingsschlacht*, *Sodom's Ende*, and *Stein unter Steinen*; Schöenherr's *Glaube und Heimat*; Grillparzer's *Des Meeres und der Liebe Wellen*; and Hebbel's *Maria Magdalene*.

A telling commentary upon popular indifference to the origin and development of our native drama is found in the significant fact that there is not now in print, nor has there ever been, a history of the American drama. An important contribution to the subject is Chapter II in Book II of Volume I of the *Cambridge History of English Literature*.<sup>5</sup> This historical survey, covering eighteen pages, is written by Professor A. H. Quinn; and it is hoped that, somewhat later, he will publish a formal History of the American Drama. The important part played in the development of our early drama by the University of Pennsylvania, and by residents of Philadelphia, is clearly brought out in this essay. Stress is likewise laid upon the influence on early dramatic writing by the performances of plays by the company under David Douglass. The recommendation by the Continental Congress (October 20, 1774) to "discountenance and discourage . . . exhibitions of shows, plays and other expensive diversions and entertainments" was generally respected; and nothing is worthy of record until 1787. In turn attention is called to Royall Tyler; to William Dunlap, an important figure in the period from 1789 to 1805; to James N. Barker of Philadelphia, and John Howard Payne of New York. The year 1825-6 is indicated as remarkable in the history of the New York stage—as a year of the beginning of important theatrical, operatic, and dramatic enterprises. The various lines of development are clearly pointed out—historical dramas, plays patriotic in incident and intent, comedies reflecting contemporary manners and customs, and satires of American life, romantic tragedy, and

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<sup>5</sup>G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York. 1917.

Gothic melodrama—and names, familiar and unfamiliar, are cited, such as Robert Montgomery Bird, Richard Penn Smith, George Henry Boker, N. P. Willis, Ann Ogden Mowatt, George Washington Custis, for example. Professor Quinn thus traces five periods prior to the Civil War, the fifth, 1825-1861, being described as a significant and creative period.

An important new work in the field of early American drama deals with the interesting figure properly termed "The Father of American Drama." This is the fruit of studies prosecuted at Columbia University by Dr. Oral Sumner Coad.<sup>6</sup> This biography of more than three hundred pages not only narrates in detail the story of Dunlap's life, but also affords an excellent survey of the field of American drama for the period considered. If the author lacks the charm of style indispensable for this type of biography, he is lacking neither in industry nor in the commendable ambition to interpret correctly the relation of Dunlap to the culture of the period. The author, it would appear without exaggeration, pronounces Dunlap "unquestionably the most conspicuous leader (among American dramatists) at the end of the century, for in every case he was among the first to try the novelty which later became the recognized convention." The new and revised edition of *The American Dramatists*,<sup>7</sup> by Mr. Montrose J. Moses, is another valued contribution to the critical literature dealing with the American drama. Mr. Moses is one of the three or four men in the country best informed upon all phases of the American drama and the American theatre; and while this book, if first written to-day, would be more decisive and sure in its critical tone, it contains a great deal of very genuine interest and value. The new edition contains three new chapters, indicating the rise of new dramatists, the influence of Little Theatres, and the advance in the technic of the moving picture. The volume is especially useful for its pleasantly readable and compact biographies of Bronson Howard, James A. Herne, David Belasco, Percy and Steele Mackaye, Augustus Thomas, William Gillette, and Clyde Fitch.

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<sup>6</sup> *William Dunlap: A Study of His Life and Works and of His Place in Contemporary Culture.* The Dunlap Society, New York. 1917.

<sup>7</sup> Little Brown & Company, Boston. 1917.

One of the refreshing signs of the vitality of American dramatic criticism is the recent appearance of a collection of stimulating papers, random yet unified by a common fixity of high purpose, dealing for the most part with current drama on the stage in this country.<sup>8</sup> Mr. Eaton is an effective writer, who, while being a "high-brow" by temperament, is wilfully "low-brow" by determined choice. It is a matter, not simply of pride, but of professional conscience, with him to write dramatic criticism "straight at" the average person; and he certainly has "put it over" to the "man-in-the-street" in the pages of the *American Magazine*. The ablest of his writings, in my judgment, is found in this very volume—an essay reprinted from the *Century Magazine*—entitled: "The Man of Letters and the New Art of the Theatre." Read this if you wish to test the flavor of Eaton's criticism—though he is always refreshing by reason of his simple style, his keen perception, his mildly ironic tone, his possession of definite standards, and his ability to write with equal ease and fascination about "gold fairies," the "movies," or George M. Cohan. The volume is prefaced by that erudite and gifted young critic of contemporary drama, Mr. Barrett H. Clark, who points out the need for unbiased dramatic criticism in this country and deftly turns a compliment to Mr. Eaton.

A work, carefully compiled, adequately documented, but singularly deficient in the art of characterization is the *Life of Augustin Daly*,<sup>9</sup> by his brother Joseph Francis Daly. It tells with accuracy and in abundant detail the story, not only of the life of America's greatest theatrical manager, but also of the conditions and vicissitudes of the New York stage in the middle nineteenth century. Motives of delicacy certainly precluded any fulsome characterization of the famous theatrical manager by his brother; but one lays down the book with a sense of incompleteness, because of the absence of any interpretation or summing up of Daly's contribution. Augustin Daly was born at Plymouth, North Carolina, on July 20th, 1838, in the very year his

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<sup>8</sup> *Plays and Players: Leaves from a Critic's Scrapbook*, by Walter Prichard Eaton. Stewart & Kidd Company, Cincinnati. 1916.

<sup>9</sup> The Macmillan Company, New York. 1917.

father established himself there in the lumber business. In recalling that Daly lived a memorable life, made important contributions to the culture of the time through his productions, established theatres in New York and London, and took the first American company to Germany and France, it must be pointed out that he belonged to the school to which Henry Irving as actor and William Winter as critic belonged. These men never "lived over" into the era of modern biography. The names of Ibsen, Björnson, Hauptmann, Sudermann, for example, are not found in the index; though Daly did have some traffic with Pinero, produced *Cyrano de Bergerac* outside of New York, considered producing a play by Brieux, tried to persuade Oscar Wilde to write a play for him, and—best of all his works—gave to the world, through his influence, the most brilliant and remarkable interpreter of English comedy of the nineteenth century, Ada Rehan.

An interesting event, always, is the appearance of one of Mr. Clayton Hamilton's collections of magazine articles upon current drama, chiefly as produced in New York City. To the two preceding volumes, *The Theory of the Theatre* and *Studies in Stagecraft* is now added a third, *Problems of the Playwright*<sup>10</sup>—all with unfailingly alliterative titles. With each new volume the author exhibits enlarged powers of observation and increased concern for the development of the drama in America. Mr. Hamilton must be a delightful talker—the chatty, conversational tone characterizes all his writings. The decisive note of the Chautauqua lecturer is there, too—everything is finally settled as we go along. With an active and inquiring mind, enriched by wide reading in certain sections of the history of the drama and the stage, he succeeds in investing each subject with a lively interest. His condemnation, when it comes, is unrelieved: utter damnation. His praise, when it comes, which is not infrequently, is panegyric. It is refreshing to learn from one who once elevated Pinero to the supreme pedestal of modern drama, that Lord Dunsany has indubitably written two of the "greatest plays of modern times"; and to note that Sir James M. Barrie

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<sup>10</sup> Henry Holt & Company, New York. 1917.



has at last been "discovered" by one who in *The Theory of the Theatre*, for instance, made no mention of Björnson or Strindberg, of Hauptmann or Sudermann, of Schnitzler or Van Hoffmannsthal. The author is a keen student of dramatic technic; and one of the most interesting chapters is "Building a Play Backward," in two parts, in which he acknowledges the debt which Mr. Elmer L. Reizenstein owes him for the suggestion of the exceedingly ingenious technical device of "On Trial." This is much the best of Mr. Hamilton's collections of monthly papers on drama—charming in its naïveté, fertile in ideas, refreshingly dogmatic in tone, and authentically metropolitan in its impatience with the desert wastes outside of New York City.

A genuinely interesting, a thoughtfully written book, is *The Technique of Play Writing*.<sup>11</sup> It is constructed with care and discrimination; each chapter is an epitome of representative and well-considered views upon the subject. Through close study of the drama and wide familiarity with the theatre of to-day, the author illuminates the more technical discussion with interesting and pertinent examples, frequently chosen from dramas recently produced and more or less known to the many. It is not unfair to say that it is inaccurately described on the front cover as "a full working guide of theory and practise for those who would write and market plays." Mr. Archer's *Playmaking* was really a treatise on "how to criticise a play"; Mr. Andrews's book is a treatise on "how to take a play to pieces." It is seriously to be doubted if a successful "full working guide" on "how to write a play" will ever be written. No adequate answer, even by a working dramatist, has ever been supplied for the question of how to write a play.

The third series of the *Publications of the Dramatic Museum of Columbia University*,<sup>12</sup> which recently appeared, calls renewed attention to these valuable papers, delightfully edited, on the problems of the dramatist, the art of playmaking, and the technic of the theatre. In his introduction to "A Catalog of Models and of Stage Sets," for the Museum, Professor Brander Mat-

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<sup>11</sup> The Home Correspondence School, Springfield, Mass. 1915.

<sup>12</sup> Corlies, Macy & Company, New York. 1916.

thews, with his characteristic clarity and vigor, points out the necessity for studying the theatre as the medium in which the dramatist works. Models of buildings showing the evolution of the playhouse, maps and plans, designs for stage sets, prompt-books, lives of the players, are especially cited as exhibits indispensable to a museum of the sort desired. Professor Thorndike writes an elaborate preface to Kipling's "How Shakespeare came to write *The Tempest*," effectively indicating the sources Shakespeare may have utilized, in addition to the "original Stephano fresh from the seas and half-seas over," a suggestion which Kipling neatly lifts from Malone, and in which Malone acknowledges he had been anticipated by Douce in 1807. Kipling and Shakespeare—the connotation gives a heightened validity to a suggestion which otherwise might escape in the welter of ingenious explanation of Shakespearean sources. In the paper entitled "How to Write a Play" are reprinted the most interesting of the letters on this topic from French playwrights, answers to the query of Abraham Dreyfus, who published his findings in *Comment se fait une pièce de théâtre* (Paris: A Quantin, 1884). These letters, for the most part, are genial evasions of the question; and the introduction by Mr. William Gillette is a rather circuitous avoidance of the subject. Selections from Sarcey's dramatic criticism are collected in a paper under the title "A Theory of the Theatre"—a subject dear to Professor Matthews, who has expounded the ideas again and again—in magazine and book: the conventions of the theatre, and the necessity for them, and the law of the *scène à faire*; and there is also printed Sarcey's discussion of the artistic advisability of separating the comic and the tragic. The most enjoyable of this third series of papers is William S. Gilbert's "A Stage Play," which appeared in *Tom Hood's Comic Annual* for 1873. It is lucidly introduced by Mr. Archer, who points out that, in important details, Gilbert was under the influence of the ideals for dramatic success generally entertained at the period. Mr. Archer maintains that in pleading for mutual tolerance between Church and Stage, Gilbert employed a method which exactly anticipated that of Mr. Bernard Shaw. "The *scène à faire* which he had in his mind's eye was to be a scene of haughty recrimination—

the Archbishop reproaching the curate for combining the pulpit with the stage, the curate reproaching the Archbishop with his hypocritical denunciation of an institution from which he derives, in the shape of rent, an income of, say, four thousand a year. In his very first play, *Widowers' Houses*, Mr. Shaw wrote, to all intents and purposes, the scene which Gilbert here forecasts; and he has repeated it, in different guises, over and over again." This is a very restricted criticism, and will not bear inspection for a moment. The statement applies to Shaw's "economic" plays, during his earliest period; but has only incidental pertinency as applied to his more important plays, of greater maturity of workmanship.

A final phase in the rapid and progressive growth of interest in the theatre is illustrated in the number of suggestive and informing books dealing with the various forms of experimentalism in theatrical production in America. In *The Little Theatre of the United States*,<sup>13</sup> Constance D'Arcy Mackay, whose plays for amateurs and children and books on play-production for amateurs are well known, tells the history of the rise and influence of the little theatre, in Europe and subsequently in this country. In a series of excellent chapters the author describes the progress and contributions of the little theatre in this country, in New York and in the East generally, in Chicago and in the West, in the South; with laboratory theatres, such as Harvard's 47 Workshop Theatre; and with the little country theatres. In a suggestive conclusion we are told: "While repertory is dying out of the commercial theatre it is bearing new and significant fruit in the Little Theatres. They *are* the repertory theatres of the present. . . . The repertory theatre is here in our midst. To the ambitious actor as well as to the ambitious playwright it offers salient advantages. . . . [Our new repertory theatres] release the power of the actor and by freeing his imagination they likewise liberate the imagination of the audience." A work of similar character, along broader lines though of briefer compass, is *The Insurgent Theatre*<sup>14</sup> by Professor Thomas H.

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<sup>13</sup> Henry Holt & Company, New York. 1917.

<sup>14</sup> B. W. Huebsch, New York. 1917.

Dickinson, dealing in a sane and common-sense fashion with "recent events in the non-commercial theatre as they refer to organization and management." In addition to topics treated in Miss Mackay's book are found chapters on such subjects as Subsidy, The Federated Audience, New Ideas of Circuit, the Theatre and the Law. Professor Dickinson's conclusions are sane and conservative; the graver difficulties, innate weaknesses, and frequent failures in the insurgent movement are frankly recognized without equivocation. In the enthusiastic effort expended, the self-sacrificing spirit displayed, the will to order, the definite striving toward forms of organization and standards of workmanship, the persistence in the discovery of right ways and the readiness to profit by errors—all these signs are recognized as hopeful auguries for the future. "All in all," concludes the author, "the theatre seems to me to-day in the not unencouraging position of a young runner who for some time has been cantering about warming up and now bends over the tape ready and eager for a race against strong odds."

In *The Community Theatre—in Theory and Practice*<sup>15</sup> Louise Burleigh approaches many of the questions treated in the two former books just noticed; but the stress is less upon the historical than upon the practical side of the problem. Valuable for the concrete suggestions they embody are such chapters as "How shall we organize?" "What can be done with little"; and "Suggestions." In a concluding chapter on "The theatrical renaissance" the author thus voices her views and her hopes for the future: "The community theatre carries a promise to the theatre as an art, which is not equalled, I think, by any other theatrical ideal. The arts in the theatre are given every opportunity. . . . [The community theatre] creates an audience which not only understands art, but which comes clamoring for the gift of art; and it takes away from the theatre the danger—the stultification and oblivion—which hangs over it now upon its present and commercial basis." Mr. Percy Mackaye, whose community masque, *Caliban*, was given with such powerful and memorable effect in New York, writes an interesting prefatory

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<sup>15</sup> Little, Brown & Company, Boston. 1917.

letter to the volume; and the substance of his address before the American Civic Association in Washington on December 13, 1916, has recently been published with the title, *Community Drama, Its Motive and Method of Neighborliness. An Interpretation*.<sup>16</sup> Especial stress is laid in the preface upon the functions of the newly appointed Federal Commission on Training Camp Activities, and their inspiring task, viz., to establish "a great affirmative system, instead of a merely sterile negative one." In the text we are told in significant words: "If it is to achieve its constructive ideals of peace, Community Drama must be organized with the permanency and trained efficiency of the regular army—for it represents the beginnings of an army of peace. It can only be made by trained creative artists, expert in the art of the theatre and inspired by the spirit of the community. My ideal of community drama is this: By means of large and nobly sensuous symbolism, to harmonize the complex art inheritances of drama with the simplicity of Christ's social message, for the inspiration and expression of growing democracy."

Valuable on the constructive side, full of accurate descriptions and attractive illustrations, is the work by Frank A. Waugh on *Outdoor Theatres*,<sup>17</sup> in effect a treatise on "the design construction and use of open-air auditoriums" as phrased in the sub-title. It is pointed out in a foreword by Percy Mackaye that "in the country, at present, there are few, or none [outdoor theatres] which are not privately owned, built usually for city 'colonies' in the country. Yet no better investment—in pleasure and the resultant attraction of wealth—could be made by a country community than an outdoor theatre properly conducted during the outdoor season." After excellent and informing chapters on "Questions of use" and "Problems of design," the author briefly and interestingly describes certain "selected examples," of which mention may be made here of the Greek Theatre at the University of California, the Redlands Bowl, the real municipal theatre at Anoka, Minnesota, and the outdoor

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<sup>16</sup>Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston and New York. 1916.

<sup>17</sup>Richard G. Badger, Boston. 1917.

theatre at Carmel, California. It is recommended as a good principle to produce in an outdoor theatre only such entertainments as can be presented there to better advantage than in an indoor theatre. Shakespeare's masterpieces are held to be "reasonably available for outdoor performances"; practically the entire body of modern drama as it now exists is ruled out. The need is felt for "rural drama which would reach its artistic perfection when presented in a purely rural environment." Greek drama, masques, and simple pageants are named as the forms best suited for ready adaptation to the present needs of the outdoor theatre. With the cosmic pageantry of a world-war dwarfing into insignificance all present forms of peaceful communal expression, it may be that a new and immensely elevated scale for colossal performances may be set for outdoor performances of the post-bellum future. We may well take to heart Mr. Mackaye's impressive words: "Neighborliness—symbolism—drama: these three. In our new ritual of democracy, the last only is added to the master method of the great symbolist of Nazareth, to complement and organize for our day and race, the simple message of His own social commandment."

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